

# Building a Brighter Future

## Alaska and New Hampshire Guardsmen team up to build a school in Ecuador

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Nestled in the Pacific coastal lowlands of western Ecuador lies the tiny village of Pacoche en Medio. A drive down the one and only dirt road that passes through the serene, rural village reveals sites of everyday living; mules carrying heavy loads, farm animals scurrying about, and people looking out from their bamboo homes.

Sounds so familiar to us as city dwellers don't exist in this village of 450 people. There are no horns honking, no telephones ringing, and no televisions playing. Instead, the occasional bray of a burro, the crow of a rooster, or the stir of a child playing alongside the road are typical sounds filling the air.

Life is simple here.

Men either fish commercially or farm for a living. Women stay home to raise children, care for elderly parents, and weave baskets and hats for commercial sale. Children attend school for nine months out of the year in the one schoolhouse (a 30-year-old bamboo structure) available in the village.

The school, damaged over the years by the forces of El Niño, provides a forum for elementary (kindergarten through sixth grade) education. No opportunity beyond that level exists in the village. Once 6th grade is completed (usually at age 12), boys quickly transition into adulthood and go to work with their fathers. Girls stay home with their mothers and help with domestic chores; and so the cycle goes.

But not for much longer. The cycle is about to be broken and children's lives changed thanks to Air National Guard civil engineers from Alaska and New Hampshire who deployed to Pacoche in February and March, respectively, to build a much-needed school there.

On February 11, 41 members of the 176th Civil Engineer Squadron from Anchorage, AK, began phase one of a project to build a two-room schoolhouse, home economics building, water storage tower and latrine system for the people of Pacoche en Medio. Two weeks later, on February 24, 35 construction members from the 157th CES from Portsmouth, NH, arrived to take over from the Alaskan engineers and complete phase two of the project.

Over the four-week construction period, the civil engineers mixed more than 55 cubic yards of concrete and 2 cubic yards of stucco, shoveled 15 cubic yards of rocks and 10 cubic yards of sand, hand placed hundreds of five-gallon buckets of concrete, laid more than a thousand concrete blocks, welded scores of steel bars for windows, and installed more than 2,100 square feet of metal roofing.

With temperatures averaging 85-90 degrees, heat exhaustion was of prime concern and proper hydration the number one goal for the men and women who spent hours each day sweating from extensive manual labor. Hundreds of bottles of water were consumed by the crews, an effort that ultimately paid off since no one became ill from the heat.

As with most construction projects, however, not everything went as planned for either team.

For the Alaskans, adversity struck the first day on the job. They arrived at the site expecting to see a concrete slab in place for the school's foundation; but it wasn't there. Heavy rains a week earlier made it impossible for the Ecuadorian contractor to accomplish the task in the time planned.

"Not having the slab in place put us four days behind schedule," admitted Lt Col Andrew Mamrol, 176th CES commander. "We were expecting to start laying concrete blocks right away, but instead we had to help the contractor prepare and place the slabs."

For the New Hampshire engineers, heavy rains during the second week of their deployment caused the project to come to a complete halt for at least a day. The road to the village was washed out and, in some areas, covered by up to 3 feet of mud. Six New Hampshire engineers hiked 3.5 miles to the construction site to assess likely damage to the school. Fortunately, the site had remained unscathed by the wind and rain, and within 24 hours the crews were back at work — but not in the usual way.

For the next two days the village road remained impassable, so the entire crew had to hike 3.5 miles to reach the site, assisted only by small pick-up trucks when possible. Although poor road conditions caused significant delays in the remaining four days of the construction project, the civil engineers pressed on, unwilling to let the forces of nature interfere with their goal to complete the major construction phases of the school.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for both citizen soldier teams while deployed to Ecuador was the lack of modern tools and heavy equipment. Fortunately, the teams brought an assortment of power tools and power generation equipment, all of which helped move the project along.

“Without our contingent of tools, this project would not have come together in the time allotted,” said Capt Ed Soto, 176th CES project officer.

A concrete truck was perhaps the one heavy equipment item sorely missed by all. Having no means to mix and place large amounts of concrete, the engineers had to rely on two small mixers, several wheelbarrows, and lots of 5-gallon buckets for placement.

The teams’ resource limitations were completely overshadowed, however, by the graciousness of the village people. Each day, they waited with excitement for the bus carrying the engineers to arrive in the village.

“We woke up at 5 a.m. daily, ate breakfast at our hotel in Manta, then took a 40-minute bus ride to the job site,” explained SMSgt Tom Hull, 176th CES. “It was easy to get up that early knowing we’d be greeted by the waves and smiles of villagers who ran out of their homes as soon as they heard our bus.”

From day one, the villagers showed excitement and gratitude toward the ANG men and women, showering them with kindness and gifts and frequently providing lunches of soups and rice dishes.

According to the village’s schoolteacher, Carlos Vite Rodriguez, approximately 20 students will begin 7th grade in April when the new school year begins. Rodriguez will continue to teach his 70 elementary school students and another teacher is set to teach grades 7-12.

Knowing that the children of Pacoche en Medio will soon be able to receive an education beyond the 6th grade is a feeling of accomplishment hard to put into words for the civil engineers. They not only helped build a community in a small Ecuadorian village, but helped build a lasting bridge between North and South America.

MSgt Charles Sutton, 176th CES, pushes a wheelbarrow full of concrete during the first phase of construction of a new school in a village in Ecuador. *(Photos by Maj Donna Prigmore)*

TSgt Todd Peplow and SSgt John Swearingin, both of the 176 CES, pour concrete mix. No concrete mixer trucks were available in the village to aid in the construction of the school.

